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The Iñupiat Origin of Santa Claus

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Abstract

This paper rejects the idea the legendary character Santa Claus traces back to Saint Nicholas and instead proposes a more recent historical figure – Walter Clement Shields (1884–1918) who organised reindeer fairs in Seward Peninsula, Alaska between 1915 and 1918. Shields died of an influenza epidemic in 1918 but was by venerated by indigenous inhabitants of northwest Alaska, the Iñupiat. Stories of Shields in Iñupiat folklore became embellished when retold and they were spread by traders of reindeer meat across the US in the 1920s.

Introduction

Santa Claus is a legendary character often claimed to be based on Saint Nicholas[1] (Curtis, 1995; English, 2012, 2020) who Dutch colonists brought to America in the form of Sinterklaas (from Middle Dutch, 'Sinter Niklaas') in the 17th century. This hypothesis is doubted by other scholars, who point out there is no literary evidence of Santa Claus among the earliest Dutch settlers of the colony New Netherland (Jones, 1954; Hagstrom, 1966; Nissenbaum, 1997: 63-65). Dutch colonists were "Calvinist and hagiophobic in the extreme" (Hagstrom, 1966, 249) and it would not make sense they had revered Saint Nicholas. According to Siefker (2006: 12):

> Dutch colonists did not bring Nicholas with them as commonly believed. New Amsterdam Dutch were Reformation Dutch, saint-haters opposed to the Catholic Church; they had no use for Saint Nicholas and other such papist carryings-on.

Proponents of the idea Dutch colonists did bring with them the tradition of Sinterklaas to America argue absence of Santa Claus in 17th and early 18th century literature overlooks word of mouth (the first mention of Santa in American literature is *Rivington's New-York Gazetteer* in 1773). Bowler (2017: 50) claims variant spellings of Santa Claus (e.g., Santaclaw and Sancte Claus) suggests a "long-standing oral transmission" before these names were first recorded. However, if Dutch colonists did tell stories of Santa – Saint Nicholas in Dutch tradition (like medieval legends) poorly resembles the modern image of Santa Claus (Hagstrom, 1966: 249). Sinterklaas for example does not travel to the Netherlands from the North Pole, but Spain; he rides a white horse, not a sleigh pulled by flying reindeer; he dresses in liturgical garments, not a red coat and carries a bishop's staff, not a sack of presents; nor is assisted by toymaker elves. The idea Santa Claus derives from Saint Nicholas is doubtful given these profound differences between the two; furthermore, medieval depictions of the latter are occasionally even beardless.

Knickerbocker Santa Claus

In 1954, the scholar Charles Jones published an article titled 'Knickerbocker Santa Claus' criticising the idea the legend of Santa traces back to Sinterklaas. He instead proposed Santa was largely the invention of Washington Irving, who published *History of New York* in 1809. In this book, Saint Nicholas appears the first time in non-liturgical garments, a "broad-brimmed hat, a huge pair of Flemish trunk hose, and a pipe". Irving revised his book in 1812 to include

[1] A 4th century bishop of Myra (modern Demre, Turkey).

Saint Nicholas riding in a wagon over the tops of trees to deliver presents to children (although, the wagon is not pulled by reindeer, nor does he descend chimneys[2]). Irving's book is satire and cannot be proven to be based on Dutch folklore despite claims to the contrary. Was Santa Claus therefore a literary invention of Washington Irving? Jones would go as far as claiming "Without Irving, there would be no Santa Claus" (Jones, 1954: 374) but resemblance of Saint Nicholas in Irving's book to the modern Santa is only slight (Irving does not mention reindeers, elves nor the North Pole), in fact, "gift-giving receives little emphasis" and "there is no physical resemblance, apart from paunchiness and pipe-smoking – to Santa Claus" (Siefker, 2006: 15).

The Night Before Christmas

Presumably influenced by Irving's book, in 1910 the *New York Spectre* published the first poem on Santa (using the name Sancte Claus) and in 1921, another poem ('Old Santeclaus with Much Delight') was published with an illustration of Santa Claus riding a sledge pulled by a reindeer (Jones, 1954: 380). A few years later, the poem 'The Night Before Christmas' was published which describes Santa Claus riding a sleigh across the night sky, pulled by eight flying reindeer, landing on a rooftop. Santa goes down its chimney and fills stockings (hanging over a fireplace) with presents. One might argue this poem is the primary source of the Santa Claus legend since it has core ingredients of the modern Santa motif. The problem, however, is Santa (or rather Saint Nicholas) in this poem is diminutive, so too are his reindeer (who are described as miniature) unlike the modern Santa who appears as a human of ordinary height.

In 1837, Clement C. Moore claimed authorship of the poem (first published anonymously in a New York newspaper in 1823) and later included it in his book *Poems* (Moore, 1844: 124-127) but it did not become widely known until 1857 when published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* and *Harper's Weekly*. Images of Santa Claus at this time were not yet standardised as an ordinary-sized jolly bearded man in a red coat who delivered presents (on a sleigh by reindeer); for example, a sketch of Santa in *Harper's Weekly* in 1858 depicts him as beardless riding a sledge pulled instead by a turkey, while the earliest illustration of 'The Night Before Christmas' depicts Santa as diminutive in size and wearing trunk hose (Siefker, 2006: 14-15).

[2] Saint Nicholas is described by Irving as dropping presents down chimneys, but not going down them. The earliest literary source to mention Santa Claus descending chimneys dates to 1913 and mentions "Old Santaclaw has come down the chimney" (Jones, 1954: 374).

Figure 1. The earliest illustration of Santa Claus from 'The Night Before Christmas'.[3]

Thomas Nast

The artist Thomas Nast (a staff illustrator of *Harper's Weekly*) is credited as first making Santa Claus live at or near the North Pole in the 1860s (a poem illustrated by Nast in 1869 says Santa lives "near the North Pole, in the ice and snow" and in 1866 he captioned one of his images as "Santa Claussville, N.P. [North Pole]"). There are though no toymaker elves as Santa's helpers in Nast's illustrations; the earliest illustration of Santa with elves dates to 1873 on a front cover issue of the US magazine *Godey's Lady's Book*. By the 1920s, the illustrator Norman Rockwell popularised Santa's toy workshop and images of Santa Claus had finally become standardised:

> Santa was then portrayed by dozens of artists in a wide variety of styles, sizes, and colors. However, by the end of the 1920s, a standard American Santa – life-sized in a red, fur-trimmed suit – had emerged from the work of N. C. Wyeth, J. C. Leyendecker, Norman Rockwell and other popular illustrators. The image was solidified before Haddon Sundblom, in 1931, began thirty-five years of Coca-Cola Santa advertisements that further popularized and firmly established this Santa as an icon of contemporary commercial culture. (St. Nicholas Center[4])

[3] T. C. Boyd, 1848 (facsimile).

[4] https://www.stnicholascenter.org/who-is-st-nicholas/origin-of-santa [last accessed 30/11/2021]

Figure 2. Illustration by Thomas Nast, 1869.

Santa as a Wildman?

Regardless of whether scholars argue Santa Claus originated from Sinterklaas (English, 2020) or from the imagination of Washington Irving (Jones, 1954), most maintain there was a development of Santa through Moore, Nast, and Rockwell before the image became the norm and standardised – the motif of a bearded man in a red fur-trimmed suit delivering presents but Siefker (1997, 2006) argues for an older origin of the Santa Claus legend in stories of wildmen and fairies such as the old Finnish tradition of Joulupukki. This idea is supported by Vallance (2002) and there is a similar hypothesis arguing for a prototype of Santa Claus in shamanism (Renterghem, 1995) or Norse mythology (Luccese, 2012). None of these ideas are convincing.

Walter Clement Shields

An alternative hypothesis for the origin of Santa Claus is hereby proposed. Instead of the motif of Santa becoming standardised over a century from Moore, Nast, to Rockwell (1820s to the 1920s), the modern form of Santa Claus can be explained as based on a historical person in that timeframe, with most standardised Santa traits. Such a figure exists – Walter C. Shields (1884-1918). In the 1890s, hundreds of domesticated reindeer from Siberia were transported to northwest Alaska by the US government; their purpose was to provide a source of sustenance for native inhabitants of Seward Peninsula, the Iñupiat (VanStone, 2000). The US government relied heavily on Sámi herders from Norway to teach Iñupiat reindeer husbandry.[5] In 1915, US

[5] The main breeding range for the imported reindeer in Alaska was located between Teller and Nome in Seward Peninsula (northwest Alaska); on a lesser scale, the Yup'ik of southwest Alaska also adopted reindeer husbandry.

Bureau of Education Superintendent of Schools for the Northwestern District of Alaska, Walter C. Shields organised a reindeer fair to bring together herders from across the Seward Peninsula (Willis, 2006: 292). The first fair was held at Igloo in 1915 and included reindeer-sleigh races (Olson, 1969: 42); between 1916-1918 more reindeer fairs were held (at Igloo, as well as towns Noatak and Noorvik) and they grew larger in size and activities. Shields purchased presents for competition winners at these fairs and transported them on a sledge (VanStone et al. 2000: 70).

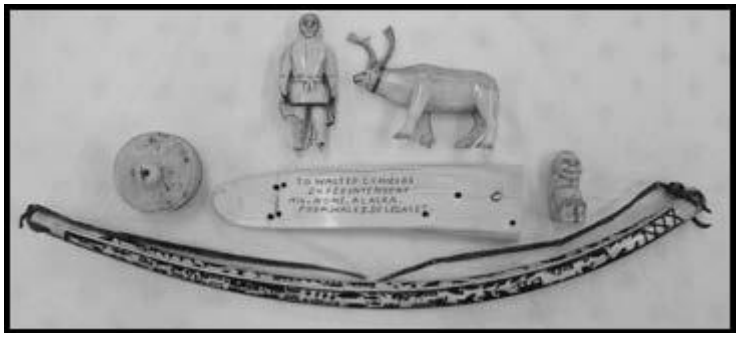

Figure 3. Ivory artwork from the Shields Collection, Carrie M. McLain Museum. The tusk is inscribed to Walter C. Shields, Superintendent, 1916 (Nome, Alaska).

In November 1918, Shields died of an influenza epidemic which also resulted in deaths of many Iñupiat in Nome, Alaska; the fairs never returned. However, Shields was venerated by the Iñupiat (Olson, 1969: 60) and stories about him were embellished and fictionalised through oral retellings; he is accurately still remembered by the Iñupiat as a bearded man who delivered gifts on a reindeer-sleigh near the North Pole, but fictional storytelling include Shields having delivered presents on his sleigh to further away regions and having magical attributes. These stories as a mixture of fact and fiction contain most standardised traits of Santa Claus as a gift-bearer, riding a sleigh pulled by reindeer; Shields like Santa Claus lived in the Arctic near the North Pole (Shields was stationed at Nome). Elves as Santa's helpers in the legend of Santa Claus possibly derived from memories of the Sámi herders by Iñupiat; some attended the fairs and assisted Shields. Like elves, Sámi traditionally wear shoes with pointed toes, furthermore, on average they are smaller in size than the Iñupiat. When Sámi herders arrived in Alaska in 1894, they were described as diminutive in size, wearing upturned shoes (Olthuis, 2006: 63).[6]

[6] The source for Santa's red fur coat can be explained as the bright red coats sleigh drivers wore in races for the fair competitions; 'flying' reindeer, an exaggeration of long-distances reindeer sleighs travelled in short duration.

Figure 4. Participants in a reindeer-sleigh race at the first or second fair.[7]

Lomen and Company

How could Iñupiat stories of Walter Shields spread to America? The fairs he organised attracted reindeer meat buyers including Lomen and Company (Carl Lomen had accompanied Shields to the first reindeer fair at Igloo). These stories were spread by word of mouth outside of Alaska by not only traders but Iñupiat herders who in the 1920s were paid by Lomen and Company to stage Christmas parades of reindeer across several US cities (Willis, 2006: 296):

> They marketed live, harness-broken animals for use in Christmas parades and holiday displays, eventually securing contracts from department stores across the country, including Macy's. To contribute to the authenticity of their product, the Lomens would offer their customers the possibility of having one or more Eskimo herders accompany the animals on their trip South. After caring for the deer, these "authentic Alaskan Eskimos" would then act the part of Santa's helpers for the Christmas spectacle.

[7] Lomen Collection, Alaska and Polar Regions Archives, Rasmuson Library (University of Alaska Fairbanks).

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